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ABSTRACT

Sequenced writing assignments--a series of related writing tasks--offer students frequent opportunities to write and to acquire writing skills through redundancy, progressively more complicated cognitive and rhetorical demands, and a diversity of learning activities. The most frequently identified goal of sequencing is to move students beyond personal knowledge and personal responses to shared values and traditions. Other goals include developing cognitive skills, integrating reading and writing, and building critical thinking skills. To help students achieve these goals, sequenced assignments are arranged linearly, from easier to hardest in terms of cognitive demands. In addition, for each assignment a subset of tasks leads students through the writing process, from brainstorming to editing. Finally, sequenced assignments are recursive, allowing students to draw not only from strategies used in previous assignments, but also from the information and situations in those assignments. Planning sequences around a theme, such as the family, offers students a chance to become deeply engaged in their material, to use writing as a way of coming to know. (A selected sequencing assignment bibliography and eight sequenced writing assignments for freshman composition are appended.) (MM)

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Sequenced Writing Assignments: What's Been Done and Why?

To answer the question raised in my title, I will discuss what I learned from my informal search of the literature on sequencing writing assignments, what I learned from essays, articles, and books collected for over a year in anticipation of my developing a sequenced quarter-long freshman writing course. Then, I will describe how a colleague and I sequenced assignments for a course based on readings, discussions, and writings about family.

In the literature on designing writing assignments, the most frequently cited article is Richard Larson's "Teaching Before We Judge: Planning Assignments in Composition." Writing in The Leaflet twenty years ago, Larson praised the efforts of teachers and administrators who argued "that each assignment must fit into, and advance, the entire course, and that the composition course [at each level should] be part of a plan for the [entire curriculum in composition" (210-211). He worried, though, that in their enthusiasm to sequence English courses and programs, planners would "neglect to advise teachers how to plan and present the individual assignments in their program" (211), that they wouldn't see an "arrangement of assignments . . . as a structure in which assignments are closely related to each other in service of the goals of the program" (212). "The goals of each assignment," Larson wrote, "should be to enlarge the student's powers of thinking, organizing, and expressing ideas so that he can cope with a more complex, more challenging problem in the next assignment" (212).

After an intensive review of a not-so-extensive literature on designing writing assignments

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for teaching (as opposed to testing), I have concluded that until perhaps five to ten years ago, Larson's recommendations were seldom reflected in discussions about assignment writing. Indeed, with a few exceptions, assignments were described as if they had been designed and assigned in a vacuum. Recently, however, sequencing assignments, as you can see from the bibliography I have distributed, has found its place in discussions about planning writing and reading courses and about creating assignments.

I think that those of us who have been teaching writing for decades have known intuitively that students benefit from writing about a series of tasks on a related subject. And if, like me, you taught business writing in an English department twenty or twenty-five years ago, you used texts that assigned a series of letters, memos, and reports based on transactions between a client and a businessman. I recall that in 1967 there was something satisfying about a pedagogical approach that asked students to move from writing simple letters of inquiry to feasibility reports.

Today's interest in sequencing assignments can be described more specifically than "knowing intuitively that students would benefit from writing about a series of related subjects" and "there was something satisfying about that pedagogical approach." Here, for instance, are some of the instructional goals--many of them overlapping--that I found in the sources listed on your bibliography. Most of them, as you might suspect, evolve from ideas presented in James Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse (1968) and William Coles' The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing (1978).

Writing assignments, we know, should progressively distance the writer from her subject and her reader. Of course, as she is required to remove herself from her subject and reader, more complicated writing tasks are required of her. The ability to perform these tasks is related, we know, to the student's level of cognitive development. Furthermore, as the distancing occurs, she learns more about herself, her world, and her language.

In the case of William Coles' The Plural I, the writing course described in his book, Richard

Larson says in his introduction, forces student writers to ask themselves these questions: Who is the writer in a given piece? Where does he stand in reference to his subject? to his readers? to himself? You may recall that Coles' first assignments require definitions of "professional" and "amateur." Then, Coles says, coming at things slowly, "with a pattern of assignments that is deliberately both repetitive and incremental," he makes a series of assignments centered around the concepts of professional and amateur. The assignments require writers to examine, explore, discuss, write, and learn about these concepts, all tasks that become more complex as the course and the students move on.

To return to the goals: The most frequently identified goal of sequenced courses is this: to move students beyond personal knowledge and personal responses to shared values and traditions. In "From James Britton: The Rhetoric of Spectating," Katherine Adams explains that we can achieve this goal by incorporating expressive writing, observing, interviewing, revising, critiquing, editing, and literature into a "unified series that can overlap or be reordered and . . . integrated into each writing assignment" (15).

The second most frequently identified goal for sequenced assignments is to develop cognitive skills. To achieve this goal, Marilyn Sternglass recommends in "Integrating Instruction in Reading, Writing, and Reasoning," we should draw "on the insights of the psycholinguistic model of reading, a process-centered approach to writing, and a cognitive model of reasoning integrating analysis and synthesis" to "prepare students to master educational and professional tasks at ever-higher developmental levels" (157).

A third goal is to help students to see writing as a means of knowing and a means of coming-to-know. In a course that uses writing as a way of knowing, Ken Dowst says in his essay "The Epistemic Approach," "an assignment is part of a sequence of assignments that spiral around a central idea, progressing from relative simplicity to relative complexity of thought and expression" (78).

Some additional goals, not, incidentally, arranged in any particular order, are

- . to integrate the acts of reading and writing;
 - . to build critical thinking skills;
 - . to establish a community of shared knowledge;
 - . to prepare students for writing in their professions;
 - . to help students learn development of prose style and the vocabulary of
and method for close reading of literary texts;
 - . to prepare students for academic writing;
- and finally, to motivate students to write by encouraging a deep
engagement with their material. a goal that I will return to soon.

Generally, the sequences themselves owe their structures--however loosely--to Moffett's discussions of distancing and development and to Coles' emphasis on the relationships among writers, readers, and subjects. Within that framework, David Foster points out in A Primer for Writing Teachers, "the best sequence will bring together subject matter, writing purpose, and audience in clearly defined writing situations," organized according to the writer's logical processes, topics, or different rhetorical situations. We would do well to follow Foster's criteria for designing effective assignment sequences: they should have some rhetorical context (i.e., a clear topic, a distinct audience, and an underlying purpose which determines structure and style), the possibility for the writer to use all elements of the writing process, and a genuine significance for the writer.

What I see in discussions about sequencing assignments is that in an arrangement of a series of related writing tasks, three movements help students achieve their goals: First, assignments are arranged linearly, from easier to hardest in terms of cognitive demands, for example, from an expressive journal entry about a vivid childhood memory to an urge to action addressed to a general audience. Second, for each assignment, a subset of tasks leads students through the writing process, say from brainstorming to editing. Third, sequenced assignments are recursive, as Malcolm Kiniry and Ellen Strenski illustrate in "Sequencing Expository Writing: A Recursive Approach": "As students

move on to more complex tasks, they find themselves increasingly capable of turning back profitably to those expository strategies they already have begun to master" (192). Of course, students draw not only from strategies used in previous assignments--such as summarizing-- but also from information and situations in those assignments. This recursiveness is especially fostered when the class pursues one theme.

The approach of pursuing one theme leads me to the second half of my paper, a discussion of the assignments sequenced in my freshman writing course. It was, in fact, the goal of encouraging students to become engaged with their material that led me to design a sequenced course in the first place. Put simply, my freshman students have trouble believing that they know enough about any one subject to write effective papers. Family, my colleague Dave Bergdahl and I thought, was a subject about which they knew something, and designing a course around a theme seemed sensible, for the reasons Deborah Brandt offers in "Social Foundations of Reading and Writing":

"By pursuing one theme, a class can develop a set of concepts, a common vocabulary and common "indexical expressions," a body of shared experience, a collective frame of mind, to serve as a semantic reservoir for each writing assignment. Such continuity contributes to nearly every conceivable aspect of composing." Furthermore, Brandt points out, "A thematic approach also provides opportunities . . . for a group to [use writing to] explore complex problems, conflicting viewpoints, and changes in understanding that occur with the acquisition of new knowledge" (123).

Mark Allister, in "A Marriage of Pedagogy and Theory: Sequencing and the Pentad," adds that "writers, in gaining extensive knowledge of one subject, in delving more deeply than they would (or could) go in a single paper, explore rhetorical relationships and recognize improvements in their writing that wouldn't have been possible otherwise" (129). And our freshmen reported that writing about something they knew something about freed them to work on their writing skills.

Here, then, is a description of the sequence of assignments we designed around the theme of family, a sequence developed to move linearly, progressively within the linear sequence (i. e.,

following steps in the writing process), and recursively. To arrange the assignments linearly, we designed the last assignment first, asking ourselves, What knowledge of family and what writing skills do students need in order to urge a specified reader to take some action on a family issue? We developed the assignments you see on your handouts, then, with these two considerations: What methods for gathering information about families should they know how to use? We asked them to interview each other about their families, to reminisce, to investigate library sources, to analyze and discuss periodical articles on a wide range of family-related topics, to analyze and discuss family dynamics in four short stories, a poem, and a film, to respond in their journals to class activities and their own family dynamics. What kinds of writing skills must our students practice before they leave our classes, the scene of the only formal writing instruction they will have for two years? We wanted them to be able to summarize for a purpose and a reader, to frame their own theses, to explore a subject without taking a stance.

I can't discuss all of the assignments we gave, of course, so I have begrudgingly omitted a discussion of the formal summary assignment, begrudgingly, I say, because summary writing is an important skill that fosters critical thinking, that calls for a clear sense of purpose and audience, that requires a minimal effort in responding to it, and that serves the students well at various stages in a set of assignments. And I have omitted a discussion of the diagnostic and final essays, allowing myself simply to note that we plan to examine the pre- and post-essays to see if the handling of voice improved over the quarter and to see what shapes the definitions of family took. And I have omitted a discussion of the "free thesis" assignment, except to say (1) that students need to take away from a writing class the ability to create their own theses, and (2), that it is placed, as you can see, in the middle of the sequence. By then, we assumed, the earlier papers and the frequent class and written discussions of family would help them both identify a thesis in the literature selections and provide them with supporting frameworks for their papers.

A glance at the assignment sheet, I hope, will show you how distancing, cognitive difficulty, and

knowledge of the subject influenced our order of assignments.

To illustrate how we incorporated the second movement, the stages of the writing-as-process--a progressive movement within a linear assignment sequence--I will describe some of the writing activities that made up the first two assignments. As prewriting exercises, students discussed a summary of Eric Erickson's theory of the life cycle of the family, responding in their journals to ideas in the article and then responding to a classmate's journal response. They also wrote in their journals a brief account of a childhood incident they recalled vividly, one that had something to do with their family. Using the incident they had written about in their journals, they drafted Paper #1, written with the class as the audience. They did a round robin reading of those papers to establish criteria for revising. After small group peer evaluations, they expanded their scoring guide for their revisions and for their grades. Before they submitted their final versions, two classmates helped them edit. Indeed, there were plenty of occasions for us to intervene in the students' writing processes.

The second paper evolved from the first, as you can see from the assignment on your handout. In this assignment, each student rewrote a classmate's paper, this time making explicit in the paper the moral that was implicit in the first account. First, two students asked of each paper the question, What did the writer learn from this incident? Dave rewrote Garrison Keillor's account of his swimming lessons as a model for the ghost-written paper. After interviewing the writer of the original account, each student added and deleted details to make her point explicit. Peer revisions, the revision of the scoring guide, and peer editing followed, as did individual conferences about both papers.

While I described the steps in the evolution of those two papers to illustrate the movement of writing as a process, you can see the recursiveness--the third movement in a sequence of assignments--built into those two sets of writing activities. Nevertheless, I want to illustrate that important advantage to sequencing by describing the recursiveness in the last two sets of papers. For

one thing, both papers called for a lot of information about one aspect of government intervention in the family, so for the exploratory papers, students were forced to locate facts about the issues they selected to study--surrogacy, incest, divorce, single-parenting, care for the elderly, AIDS, social security, welfare, sex education--information that they would use selectively in the next paper. Second, their library searches required them to again summarize material. Third, for the first of the two related assignments--to present two sides to a family issue without taking a stand--we discussed their original narratives and required that the students capture in a narrative introduction the nature of the problem. We discussed many examples of opening anecdotes in popular magazines. Fourth, in the meantime, students reacted to their issue informally in their journals, discussed their issues in class, and developed a scoring guide, all tasks that had recurred during the quarter.

The next assignment required students to consider who in the government or what local, state, or national agency could do something to solve the problem they had identified for the previous paper. As you can see from the handout, this complicated assignment was broken into discrete tasks, all of which they had performed before. For the students, the most perplexing part of the assignment was the audience. Although they had written to a variety of audiences--to themselves, to their classmates, to me, to a general audience--they had problems identifying an appropriate audience for their paper. As a way to help them focus on the needs of their audience, I assigned them to write the reader of their paper a telegram in which they could have only five sentences: one establishing a context for the telegram, another stating the problem, one identifying the cause or causes of the problem, another suggesting a solution, and a final one stating what action the reader should take. In other words, they had to write a summary of their drafts.

To summarize: Sequencing writing assignments linearly, progressively within that movement, and recursively allows teachers to incorporate into our writing courses so much of what we have come to understand about writing processes and about learning. It is an approach that is sound theoretically, pedagogically, and practically. It offers students frequent opportunities to write and to acquire

writing skills through redundancy, progressively more complicated cognitive and rhetorical demands, and a diversity of learning activities. Planning sequences around a theme such as family offers students a chance to become deeply engaged in their material, to use writing as a way of coming to know. To illustrate: In their journals, three of my freshman wrote: "I have had time to think a lot about my personal values, to see how my family shaped them." "I used to think family meant mom, dad, kids, and pet. I didn't realize how many things really involve and affect family." "I did learn a lot about family. No, I take that back. I realized a lot about family that I never really took the time to consider before."

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Sequenced Writing Assignments for Freshman Composition

Paper 1. Diagnostic Essay.

Purpose: The purpose of this essay is to help your instructor determine some of your strengths and weaknesses in writing. Therefore, the essay will be read carefully but will not receive a grade. Nor will it affect your final grade.

Instructions: Please do not put your name on your essay. Instead, write your social security number at the top right corner of each page of your essay. Please use a pen if you have one.

Assignment: Family is a subject about which we all have something to say. Relying on either your own experience or someone else's, write an essay that answers the question "What is a family?" Your audience is college students.

Paper 2. A Personal Account. (Adapted from Coles/Vopat, What Makes Writing Good?)

Take any family-related event, however trivial it seems, that you still remember from your childhood. That you still remember it is one sign of its importance to you. In a paper of approximately 500 words (two to two and a half typed pages), narrate and describe the event so that your readers--our class--come to feel and understand why it was (is?) important.

Narration aims not to tell us about an event but to give us the event. Description aims not to tell us about an object but to give us the object. Because your aim in both narration and description is to show rather than tell, you will want to use specific details, especially sensory details, details that appeal to your readers' sense of taste, touch, sound, sight, and smell.

Try to make your readers experience what you experienced.

Paper 3. Ghost Writing.

Exchange papers with your assigned partner and rewrite your partner's story, continuing to use "I."

The purpose of telling your partner's story is to interpret the childhood event described in his or her Paper #2. That is, you need to help us understand what and how your partner learned from the incident. To achieve that purpose, begin your story with this sentence: This is a story about when I was _____ and I learned that _____. Keep only those details that help achieve your purpose and add new ones if they help us understand. (You will need to interview your partner to elicit additional details.)

Paper 4. Summary.

From a recent periodical, select an article about some aspect of family. Summarize the article, assuming that the summary will be sufficient for the reader, that she will not need to go back to the article.

Paper 5. Developing a Thesis.

Identify a family relationship that emerges from your reading of the four short stories discussed in class. Formulate a thesis about that relationship and develop an essay based on your thesis.

Paper 6. An Exploratory Essay.

Political rhetoric of both the right and the left (e.g., President Reagan, Governor Cuomo) claim to be Pro-Family. In an exploratory essay of approximately 1,000 words (four double-spaced typed pages), consider what it means of a political program to be pro-family. Since an exploratory essay does not come to a conclusion, and is not, therefore, thesis-driven, we would like you to begin your essay in a special way. Rather than beginning with a thesis, we would like you to begin with an anecdote or a narrative which exemplifies or embodies a pro-family stance. Develop your paper by clarifying or explaining the implications of your opening, and then follow the question wherever it leads you.

Paper 7. A Proposal.

The previous paper explores the government's impact on one aspect of the family, for example, divorce, student financial aid, Medicare, AIDS. This paper calls for you to perform several writing tasks:

1. Define the problem that you identified in the previous paper.
2. Identify the causes of the problem.
3. Identify the solution(s) to the problem. These will be solutions only a government agency (national, state, local) can provide.
4. Identify an audience who can act on your proposal or who can persuade that person or agency to act on your proposal.
5. Present a proposal in which you discuss your solutions.

Paper 8. Final Paper.

Purpose: The purpose of this essay is to help your instructor to determine if, in what ways, and how much your writing skills have improved over the quarter.

Instructions: Please do not put your name on your essay. Instead, write your social security number at the top right corner of each page of your essay. Please use a pen if you have one.

Assignment: Family is a subject about which you know a great deal. Relying on either your own experiences or someone else's, write an essay that answers the question "What is a family?" Your audience is college students.